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PROPHESYING THE WAR CRIMES TRIAL IN HUMAYUN AHMED'S SHORT STORY

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ABSTRACT

Humayun Ahmed (1955-2012), a writer, dramatist, screenwriter, filmmaker, song writer and university professor, is widely acclaimed to have been the most popular Bengali writer in his lifetime. He coined the phrase '*tui razakar*' ('thou are a collaborator') that denounces the atrocities and blatant activities of the collaborators during the liberation war of Bangladesh. Along with seven novels on the theme of 1971 liberation war, he has written some short stories around the same theme. Among 131 available short stories, eight are on this theme that depicts the bravery of the freedom fighters, the heinous activities of the collaborators and the sufferings of the freedom fighters' families. Among these, one short story, 'Mr. Jalil's Petition' portrays the issue of war crimes trial. If anyone wants to know the sentiment of mass people of Bangladesh regarding the collaborators, the reading of this story would be sufficient for them. In fact, in this story Ahmed has unflinchingly prophesied the war crimes trial in Bangladesh.

Key words: Humayun Ahmed, war crimes trial, collaborator, 1971, Bangladesh, freedom fighter

1. Introduction

Being a citizen of independent Bangladesh, Humayun Ahmed (1955-2012) knew how the glorious liberation war was tainted by the ignominious actions of collaborators who acted against their own country and countrymen. In his lifetime, he was taken to be the most popular among the fiction writers in Bangladesh. According to an article in Dhaka Tribune, he wrote over 200 fiction and non-fiction books, all of which were bestsellers in Bangladesh and his books were the top sellers at the Ekushey Book Fair, during the 1990s and 2000s ("Thirteen unknown facts" 2016). Rashidul Bari in The Times of India opined that "Humayun was a custodian of the Bangladeshi literary culture whose contribution single-handedly shifted the capital of Bengali literature from Kolkata to Dhaka without any war or revolution." (Bari 2015) Popular Bangla litterateur Sunil Gangopadhyay described him as the most popular writer in the Bengali language for a century (Mustafa 2012) and went further in commenting that Ahmed was even more popular than Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay (Bari 2012). Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus said in his praise: "Humayun's works are the most profound and most fruitful that literature has experienced since the time of Tagore and Nazrul" (Bari 2012). He is the creator of the popular Bangla phrase '*tui razakar*' (thou are a collaborator) that denounces the collaborators of 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh (Majid 2013). He also authored seven novels on liberation war and directed

movies on the same theme. This is why it is expected that he has commented on the issue of war crimes trial in the form of any short story.

Belal Begin his memoir of Humayun Ahmed remembers Ahmed saying that it was not his dad alone who got martyred in 1971 and “everyone’s memory has to be preserved” (Belal Beg). Researcher Chanchal Kumer Bose comments that writer Humayun Ahmed has delineated simple life events as well as sufferings during liberation war and post war period (qtd. in Robin Pal, Bose 2009). A blogger portrays an extract of an interview with Ahmed in which the responsibility of a writer can be found as follows:

Interviewer: You are quite popular in Bangladesh. Can’t you do something to solve some problems of your country by using this popularity?

Humayun: A writer can indicate to a problem but he won’t offer any solution; this is not his responsibility.

Interviewer: Whose responsibility is it?

Humayun: The responsibility is that of politicians’ and social reformers’. A writer is neither a politician nor a social reformer. This is not his responsibility.

Interviewer: There will be gestures but no proposals. Is it so?

Humayun: The proposal lies in the gesture.¹ (Banhiwala 2011)

That is why readers can have expectation of finding the issue of war crimes trial in Ahmed’s short stories.

1.1 Collection of short stories

Humayun Ahmed passed away in 2012. Even after five years since his unfortunate demise, readers are yet to see a complete collection of his short stories. It is a matter of research as to how many short stories he has left behind. At this backdrop, the researcher of this article got hold of a most recent publication, *Galposamagro (The Complete Short Stories)* by Humayun Ahmed, published by Kakoli Publication in 2017 as the rearranged 14th edition. It contains 115 short stories among which eight stories are based on the liberation war of Bangladesh. These are ‘*Unishsho-Ekattor*’ (Nineteen Hundred and Seventy One) (pp. 36-41), ‘*Asukh*’ (Sickness) (pp. 116-20), ‘*Jalil Shaheb-er Petition*’ (Mr. Jalil’s Petition) (pp. 352-60), ‘*Sheet*’ (Winter) (pp. 382-88), ‘*Shaymol Chhaaya*’ (Verdant Shadow) (pp. 403-09), ‘*Nandini*’ (Nandini) (pp.433-37), ‘*Paap*’ (Sin) (pp. 744-50) and ‘*Pangu Hamid*’ (Crippled Hamid) (pp. 851-58). These eight short stories depict the liberation war, the heinous activities of collaborators and Pakistan occupation forces, the bravery of freedom fighters and the sufferings of the families of these fighters. However, only ‘Mr. Jalil’s Petition’ depicts the issue of war crimes trial.

2. Objectives of the research

The aim of this study is to shed light on Humayun Ahmed’s short stories to see if he has employed the issue of war crimes trial in his fiction. The writer is known to have contributed in the genre of liberation war movies and novels in Bangladesh. Consequently, it is to be studied how genuinely as a writer he has envisioned the war crimes trial for the 1971 liberation war collaborators in his short stories.

3. Research questions

The two research questions are as follows:

- Has Humayun Ahmed dealt with the issue of war crimes trial in any of his short stories?
- Has any character in any short story envisioned the war crimes trial?

4. The background: heinous activities of the collaborators

Ahmed has effectively portrayed the characters of collaborators in at least three short stories titled ‘Nineteen Hundred and Seventy One’, ‘Crippled Hamid’ and ‘Nandini’. The collaborators are usually known as *razakar* and *albadar* to the people of Bangladesh. Ahmed has presented them in his short stories with all their monstrous and abhorrent activities and mindset for which any reader would feel disgusted.

In the story ‘Nineteen Hundred and Seventy One’ Rafiquddin is the collaborator who is seen trying to make a balance between the patriotic people and Pakistan Army. However, his real nature is exposed when the readers find Mr. Aziz, a very much gentlemanly school teacher, revolt against the Pakistani Major. At first, the reader might even assume that Ahmed is portraying the collaborator as a humane person who is forced to

¹ The original interview was in Bangla. This extract has been translated to English by the researcher.

do the loathsome job; however, finishing the story the reader would feel enraged against the collaborators. This is where the mastery of Ahmed lies as a fiction writer. Mr. Aziz, the school teacher, is termed as 'a cat with broken legs' (p.37) by his own mother because of his seemingly cowardly appearance. When confronted with the sickening behavior of the Pakistani Major, his real nature comes out. He got naked in accordance with the orders of the Major. Yet he does not reveal anything about the freedom fighters and at one moment spits on the Major who leaves him behind. In this event the collaborator's role is crucial since without his knowledge the occupation forces would not dare go deep into the rural places to interrogate these innocent local people. All this creates a sense of repulsion for the collaborators.

'Crippled Hamid' is another story the beginning and ending of which have been blended in a way that is only possible for a writer with mastery. Only this story is enough to unmask the real nature of the collaborators. Crippled Hamid was in reality a member of the collaborators' team headed by Commander Siddique. However, when freedom fighters were returning home after the war was over, Hamid came back to his village claiming he also got enrolled as a freedom fighter and this is why the villagers respect him quite well. After 30 years of liberation war, he received a wheel chair. He was also entitled for a cash donation of 10 thousand taka; however, the Chairman embezzled that money and even took two thousand taka from Hamid on the pretext of entertaining the villagers with betel leaf and sweetmeat. This makes it one and the same the activities of the collaborators and the corroded nature of contemporary political leaders. The plot becomes complex when the readers find that Hamid's granddaughter spits on his face the way 'Hindu girl Radha used to spit on him' (p. 868). In fact, Radha got the names of the collaborators and so Hamid got her drowned by putting her into a sack. Perhaps it is this atrocity that made Hamid a psychopath, for which he saw his granddaughter spitting on him while nobody else saw it happen. At last, Hamid recalls one instruction of Commander Siddique, "Do whatever you wish, but leave no proof" (p. 858). Hamid in his derailed mental capacity found his granddaughter to be a proof and so he threw her into the well. So he killed his own granddaughter without a qualm. This is the perversion of the collaborators. This is when readers find Ahmed to be a magic writer of fiction.

'Nandini' tells us another story of the perversion of the collaborators who killed Nandini's father but made a rumour of it saying that he was killed in the hands of the freedom fighters. Aziz the collaborator married Nandini in the pretext of saving her from getting killed but he got her converted to his own religion. This shows the heinous nature of the collaborators. However, readers see that this collaborator gets killed by the freedom fighters and this shows that the collaborators have to yield defeat in the long run.

5. War crimes trial

In February 2013 when Bangladesh started to get drenched with warmth after a cold wave made people suffer a lot, people crowded at Shahbag square beside Dhaka University campus. Their demand was to have right trial for the collaborators. By the end of 2016 the leaders of the collaborators got their due. Much before this real trial in Dhaka, Humayun Ahmed envisioned this happening in his short story 'Mr. Jalil's Petition'. If any foreigner wants to understand the anguish of Bangladeshis before the war crimes trial took place in reality, it is enough to read this short story which alone offers the glimpse of the agony.

The plot of the story is quite simple: Mr. Jalil started his personal campaign of getting signatures to get a trial for the killing of three million martyrs in the 1971 liberation war. He attracts the attention of a few people and dies leaving the task unfinished. The daughter of his martyred son awaits the arrival of someone who would finish the task but the ending of the story does not offer a solution.

When people close to Mr. Jalil asks him to apply for an abandoned property since it was his right to get one as the parent of a martyred freedom fighter, he retorts and in this connection tells his story to a listener this way:

One of them said, "You better apply for an abandoned property. You have lost two sons in the war, you have every right to get a house."

"What did you say?"

"What is there to say? Am I petitioning for property? Why do I need a house? The lives of my sons are so cheap that they want to pay me off with a house? How dare they? All I want is a trial. A fair trial, that's all. It should be held as per rules of civilized societies. Got it?"

“Yes, I do.”² (‘Mr. Jalil’s Petition’ 2012)

Mr. Jalil expects nothing from the state authorities though it is not that he lives a comfortable life. Rather, he is making the responsibility of the nation simpler; however, readers do not see anyone coming forward to help Mr. Jalil. Readers understand why the society or state does not show any courage in this regard. After the heartbreaking killing of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, Bangladesh felt stifled and no one dared to come forward regarding the war crimes trial. During the stifling period it became the tradition of calling the ‘Pakistan occupation forces’ as only ‘occupation forces’ and the national cabinet also started to absorb the collaborators. A curious expatriate Professor wants to know about the progress of signature campaign and the readers find Mr. Jalil commenting:

“I am still continuing, Professor. Please pray for me.”

“Are people putting down their signatures on your petition?”

“Not everyone. Many are scared.”

“Why, scared about what?”

“One really can’t tell. For some, fear is in their blood, it is in their nature. However, I am not the one to give up. I am determined to force them to a trial. What do you say? Isn’t it the right thing to do?” (‘Mr. Jalil’s Petition’ 2012)

Mr. Jalil continues his task of collecting signatures to raise a moving campaign for war crimes trial and it seems everybody gets irritated at him. Even the person whose brother-in-law got killed at the hands of collaborators find Mr. Jalil an irritating object. When Mr. Jalil goes to the newspaper office, even the youngsters there say, “Why bother about bygones? Better forget them, brother” (‘Mr. Jalil’s Petition’ 2012). At the beginning of the story, readers know about 14,300 signatures that rise to 32,000 when Mr. Jalil dies. Mr. Afsaruddin, a professor of Mathematics at Muirhead University, the narrator of the story finally becomes an expatriate and forms ‘Abdul Jalil Action Committee’ at Fargo, USA so that on behalf of the people of Bangladesh, they could raise the matter at the International Court of Justice, and write articles in foreign newspapers to organize international public opinion. However, nothing happened and the story ends this way:

Mr. Jalil's granddaughter is perhaps still waiting for my return. Perhaps she dusts off regularly her grandpa's file. After all, most girls her age tend to believe in everything people say. (‘Mr. Jalil’s Petition’ 2012)

In this story Mr. Jalil becomes the representative of the people of Bangladesh. Although he and the people do not have the executive power in their hands, they know how to dream of a better future. The university teacher, newspaper editors or owners, the landlord and all other people except Mr. Jalil in the story seem to be quite selfish. In this connection, Farhan Daud comments that this story of that period when none dared to speak about the trial but the creator of ‘thou are a collaborator’ Humayun Ahmed has proved himself to be progressive in this case too. (Daud 2012) The story comes as a Zen slap for us. It is true Ahmed did not live to see the vision of Mr. Jalil coming true to life; of course, the International Crimes Tribunal under International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) Act 1973 started functioning in 2010. He started the war crimes trial in fiction and it all ended in reality after the demise of the story teller.

6. Mr. Jalil’s vision came true at last

Ahmed as a short story writer enlivened history in his fiction on 1971 liberation war and what he envisioned in the story ‘Mr. Jalil’s Petition’ came true in real life in Bangladesh. It was not Mr. Jalil’s vision alone, neither was it just Ahmed’s; rather it has been the vision of the whole of Bangladesh. When the war crimes trial started in 2010 under the International Crimes Tribunal-1 according to the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) Act 1973, there was still some confusion whether the trial would go on. The ICT statute share common spirit with other international ones such as the Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, 1993 [ICTY Statute], the Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, 1994 [ICTR Statute], the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998 [Rome Statute] or the Statute of the Special Court for Sierra Leone, 2002 [Sierra Leone Statute] (“ICT-BD Case No.03” 2013). However, in the beginning of 2013 mass people started to gather around the Shahbag square. There were voices to have the

² The original Bangla story ‘Jalil Shaheb-er Petition’ has been translated as ‘Mr. Jalil’s Petition’ by Ferdous Hasan and published in the Daily Star.

right judgment for the war criminals so that the whole nation would get satisfied. Eventually the nation got what was due for a long time. In six years six top collaborators got hanged and some got life term among which one got the life term due to his old age and senility. At this backdrop, the short story 'Mr. Jalil's Petition' stays as a historic example of empathizing with mass sentiment and foretelling a historic event of a country.

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